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ABSTRACT

In 1987, parents and teachers from diverse neighborhoods of a local school district in New York (New York) founded the Bronx New School, a small public elementary school of choice that was meant to be learner-centered, with high standards for all. The school was organized into heterogeneous, multi-age classes and structured to encourage collaboration among faculty, students, and families. In spite of political stresses, the school's founding values have survived. This report focuses on the first 3 years of its life, a time when a comprehensive assessment system was designed and used throughout the school. The assessment system was designed to support instruction and learning through the collection of descriptive records of student growth. Teacher-kept records, student-kept records, and samples of student work in portfolios are used in combination to develop a picture of student learning. A developmental framework constructed by teachers provides a general guide for expectations of progress. The implementation of the system is illustrated through the case study of one student. (Contains 31 references.) (SLD)

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The Bronx New School

Weaving Assessment into the Fabric of Teaching and Learning

Beverly Falk

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September 1994

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Muchas de las cosas que necesitamos pueden esperar.
El nino no.
Ahora es el momento en que sus huesos se estan
formando,
su sangre se esta haciendo.
Y sus sentidos se estan desarrollando.
A el no podemos contestarle "Manana."
Su nombre es "Hoy."

Many of the things that we need can wait.
Not the child.
Now is the moment when his bones are being formed,
his blood being made
and his senses are being developed.
We cannot answer him with "Tomorrow."
His name is "Today."

Gabriela Mistral

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Beverly Falk

In 1987, parents and teachers from diverse neighborhoods of a local school district in New York City came together to found the Bronx New School (BNS) -- a small, public elementary school of choice.[1] Their goal was to create a school that would be "learner-centered" -- that would build on children's development, involve families, ensure diversity and equity, and achieve high standards of learning for all. These commitments were the basis for decisions about how the school would be organized and governed, and how curriculum and teaching would be developed. The school was organized into heterogeneous, multi-age classes and structured to encourage and enhance collaboration amongst faculty, students, and students' families. Classroom environments featured an interdisciplinary approach to learning, active involvement with materials and experiences, peer interaction, and many opportunities for children to develop and display their interests and their strengths.

The school was an autonomous unit, though it was administratively attached to a larger school for purposes of New York City bureaucratic management. This was because it was led by a teacher-director rather than a principal. Opening in 1988 with a small staff and about 100 students in kindergarten through 3rd grade, its population was selected through a public lottery of applicants to intentionally reflect the diversity of the district -- 1/3 African American, 1/3 Latino, and 1/3 other racial/ethnic groupings. Each year it added a new grade and new teachers so that it could carry children through the 6th grade.

Shortly after the Bronx New School was founded, it became a member of the Center for Collaborative Education, a network of elementary and secondary schools comprising the New York City affiliate of the Coalition of Essential Schools. Within and outside of this network, BNS was recognized for its application of developmental understandings to curriculum, for its comprehensive authentic assessment practices, for its atmosphere of professional development, and for its inclusion of families as part of a collaborative learning community.

After several years, political upheavals at the district level brought about changes in the school's leadership and personnel, as well as in its organization and structure. A new superintendent took steps to incorporate the school into the larger school under whose auspice the school was administratively lodged, intending to place it under the more direct administrative control of the principal of that school and thus of the district, despite the philosophical and pedagogical differences that BNS was founded upon. Parents were so distraught at the prospect of losing the kind of education created by the school that they took their case to the local board and the central New York City school board and finally to the courts. As a consequence of their efforts, the school eventually regained its autonomous status and was declared a "regular" public school, although some faculty had by then left. The parents won the right to select their own principal rather than to accept a principal selected by the central office.

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[1]The school was developed as an alternative for both families and teachers to reflect and enact their philosophy about education.

Even given these changes, the school's founding values survived and remain intact today along with many of its original practices and policies -- a testament to the strength of the school community and its beliefs and the extent to which the school's commitments were deeply rooted in the structures, norms, and operating practices of the organization. This story focuses on the school's first three years, a time when a comprehensive assessment system was designed and used throughout the entire school.

Contexts for Teaching and Learning at the Bronx New School

The assessment system at the Bronx New School emerged out of a conception of teaching that places students at the center of the learning environment. Classrooms are structured to encourage active inquiry and are stocked with a wide range of concrete materials meant to be used for direct investigation. They offer diverse experiences that provide multiple entry points into learning. Math manipulatives (bundling sticks, Powers of Ten blocks, hundreds boards, inch cubes, fraction strips, geo boards, and attribute blocks) are available in every classroom, along with science materials for direct exploration -- batteries, bulbs, magnets, wires, household chemicals, scales, balances, weights, and other natural materials. Art materials such as clay, plasticine, paper mache, paints and pastels are regularly used as tools for learning and expression. Libraries containing a range of children's literature are standard in every classroom as well. These rich, hands-on research materials, considered to be extras in many schools, were purchased with the savings obtained by not buying expensive workbooks and texts -- a serious drain on limited funds that provide much less useful grist for learning.

Students in BNS classrooms are also regularly engaged in opportunities to exchange ideas and to collaborate with peers. Extended work periods allow for indepth study independently and in groups. The school day is organized to accommodate the rhythm and pace of the children. The intent is to "provide a setting that engages learners, seeks to involve each person wholly in mind, sense of self, sense of humor, range of interests, interactions with other people in learning; that suggests wonderful ideas to children" (Duckworth, 1987, p. 1). Further, the aim is to suggest "different ideas to different children" (Duckworth, 1987, p. 7). "And that let's them feel good about themselves for having them" (Duckworth, 1987, p. 134).

To put this vision of education into practice, teachers need to understand human development and learning theory, content matter and teaching strategies, and most of all, their students. Much of this information derives from an assessment approach that places observation of students and their work at its center. As teachers observe what their students know and can do, the particular strategies their students use as they learn new things, teachers then use this information to build bridges between past and future skills and understandings. The experiences of the Bronx New Schools also demonstrates how engaging in this process also enhances teachers' general understandings of teaching and learning, building their

capacities as professionals, and providing a culture of continuous inquiry which becomes an integral part of school life.

Documenting Children's Learning: The Foundation of Assessment

The Bronx New School assessment system was designed to inform instruction and support teaching and learning through the collection of descriptive records of student growth. Teachers and school support staff across grade levels developed a common plan that systematically looked at various forms of learning in a variety of meaningful, real-life contexts. Borrowing from the work of others across the country and developing tools and instruments of their own, the staff created a system involving multiple sources of information collected over an extended period of time: Teacher-kept observations, student-kept records, and samples of student work are used in combination to develop a picture of each child's learning. These sources of direct evidence of student growth are enhanced by regular input from students' families. Assessment methods focus not only on students' accomplishments, but also on students' special strengths and the strategies they use in their learning. A developmental framework provides a general guide for expectations of progress. The accumulated information is then used for planning appropriate learning experiences and for developing curriculum responsive to students' needs and experiences.

The assessment system also documents the progress of groups of children, provides opportunities for teachers to reflect on their assessments of children and their work, and involves families in the life of the school. All of these occasions for reflection, learning, and communication have influenced curriculum, instruction, and teachers' professional development.

Unlike assessment systems that rely predominantly on tests that evaluate children against prescribed questions and standardized expectations, the primary purpose of this assessment system is to inquire about children -- to look closely at students' thoughts, strategies, and skills -- to find the most effective means of supporting their learning (Chittenden & Courtney, 1989). While the staff adopted common methods and guidelines, they are neither as rigid as those required by standardized tests nor as informal as teacher's own private record-keeping. They allow the flexibility needed for responsive teaching yet provide information necessary for accountability to families, other teachers, colleagues, administrators, and the community-at-large.

The school defined accountability more broadly than just providing information about student learning. Teachers wanted the assessment system to address how their commonly agreed upon goals for learning were being met. They developed standards for work and general indicators of progress. These were then used as a framework in which to view student growth, constructed for levels of development rather than for specific ages or grades. They were careful to ensure that this framework did not emphasize standardized outcomes at

too early a stage. Based on the knowledge that growth in the early years takes place unevenly and over an extended period of time (NAEYC, 1988) teachers felt strongly that too narrowly defined expectations of progress, such as the accomplishment of specific skills by the completion of specific grades, places students at risk of getting prematurely labelled "unsuccessful," when in reality they might only need more time and support to master needed skills and to make sense of their learning.

In addition, teachers believed that achieving the "right answers" and getting students to perform in specified ways often gets in the way of developing genuine understanding (Kamii, 1985, 1989; NAEYC, 1991; NASBE, 1988; NCTM, 1989). They wanted assessments to support and reveal a wider range of understandings than those generally demonstrated by conventional methods. As they worked with their students and talked together about these ideas, their teaching environments and accompanying assessments increasingly called attention to diverse student strengths, talents, and abilities.

Assessment of Individual Students

Teachers collected their records of student learning and growth, samples of student work, and students' own records of work across disciplines in portfolios that travelled with each child from grade to grade and from teacher to teacher. The portfolios also informed families and students themselves about what students can do as well as the particular strategies, strengths, styles and interests they bring with them to their learning experiences.

The portfolios were both cumulative and authentic. They were "cumulative" in that they contained evidence of student progress from each year of a student's school career. They were "authentic" in that the records and samples within them were not produced specifically to fulfill a set of predetermined assessment requirements, but were collected to demonstrate the range of students' activities in the natural contexts of the school's every-day life.

Information about a student's progress was placed in the portfolio at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the school year to provide a portrait of the student's development over the course of time. In addition to showing what the student had learned, the information was gathered specifically to portray particular growth issues, significant developments or interests, or an occasional sample of what the student considered to be his or her best effort at that particular point in time.

Because the Bronx New School is small and because it has continuity of philosophy, values, and teaching practice, portfolios can build a continuum of information about the child over several grades, enabling the staff to come to know all the children well and to share understandings and strategies with each other about how best to support each child's growth. This produces a community of supporters for children, exemplifying the ancient African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

Teacher-Kept Records

Teacher-kept records in the portfolio included documented observations of students, inventories and checklists of student skill development, and notes from conferences held between teacher and students about their interdisciplinary projects. These were dated and entered into the records at least once a week for each child. They were then used to inform narrative reports, completed at the middle and the end of each year, which commented on a child's general approaches to learning (i.e. each child's particular learning styles, themes, interests, etc.) as well as that child's progress towards the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge in reading, writing, mathematics, and other discipline areas.

In addition to helping teachers think systematically about students' progress, teachers' observations also expanded their conception of "the intellect." The more they observed, the more sensitized they became to the diversity of student talents and abilities. They began to recognize linguistic, logical, numerical, musical, bodily, spatial, social, and other strengths (Gardner, 1983). This in turn influenced the way they thought about curriculum and teaching. Over time, they moved away from a standardized, static curriculum calling for everyone to do and to learn the same set of things in the same way, to one that left lots of room for different ways of exploring common themes, presenting content and skills in contexts responsive to students' interests and prior experiences. They came to understand that no uniform curriculum or teaching strategy could be equally effective for all students.

Over time, teachers also recognized the limitations of uniformity in their own use of the assessment instruments. Just as they found that no one method of teaching was best for each student, they discovered that no one documentation strategy was best for each teacher. Each favored different formats for her record keeping. Some jotted down observations on note cards; others used "stick-ems" that they pasted into a notebook at the end of the day; still others carried a notebook that had sections demarcated for each child in which they would enter quick notes during the course of the day and longer reflections during preparation periods, lunch, or after-school hours. Some reviewed these records and notes regularly, jotting down a few summary lines about five children once a week. In a little over a month, a review of information about every child in the class was compiled. By the end of the school year, a substantial record of each individual's growth was accumulated.

As they experimented with different approaches and shared their experiences with each other, teachers came to understand that the assessment commonality they were seeking was not in the specifics of the instruments they used, but rather in the ways they looked at children and subsequently supported student learning. This was not easy to do, however, and they soon discovered that they did not really know as much as they wanted to about how and what to observe about children. For example, they found themselves using evaluative rather than descriptive language, attaching judgments and labels to children rather than describing exactly how and in what context something occurred. The tendency toward summative evaluation did not enhance the teaching process. Compare, for example, this early attempt at noting Stephen's progress, which evaluates his work but tells nothing about how he does it or

how it might be built upon:

> Stephen has an excellent vocabulary.
>
> Stephen does outstanding work.
>
> Stephen has excellent math skills.

with a later version attempting to portray why Stephen's teacher originally considered his work to be "excellent" and "outstanding":

> Stephen uses a rich variety of descriptive words in his writing.
>
> Stephen works independently and intensely. He thinks critically, takes risks in putting forward new ideas, and is thorough in attention to details of presentation.
>
> Stephen is fluid in his thinking about number concepts. He can generally find several solutions to a problem and is able to explain them to others in a clear way.

Other teachers also struggled with this issue. They learned from children's language and work, placing their observations in the framework of developmental progressions, thinking about how a child puts ideas together. When teachers, children and their parents received this kind of feedback, it helped them to better understand what students do, to recognize their strengths so they could build on them further, and to identify areas in need of support in order to make plans for how to address them.

As teachers documented the work of their students in these ways, many of them were overwhelmed by what seemed like the enormity of the task. They felt it that it took too much time to write notes on each student, and they thought they could just as easily keep much of this information in their memories. However, through their experiences of writing down their observations in a variety of settings in a variety of ways, most learned so much more about their students than they had previously known that they eventually became staunch advocates of keeping written records. They saw that memory of the details and the nuance which makes each child visible does indeed escape them in the blur of time passed; that only by writing down observations can teachers achieve a perspective of each student's unique growth over time.

Jotting down, reflecting, assuming the researcher stance, thus became part of their way of life. They set aside time to have conversations together which continually clarified their values and deepened their understandings about children and teaching and assessment. At the same time, they created a policy allowing each teacher to select his or her own preferences from a variety of philosophically compatible assessment tools.

A number of checklists and inventories on literacy development were among their collection of tools. A universal favorite was one checklist that identifies significant elements of early literacy growth, "Observations of Reading Behaviors" (Davidson, 1985), shown on page 8. All of the primary grade teachers also used another instrument, "Settings for Assessment of Children's Reading in Primary Classrooms" (Center for Collaborative Education/Educational Testing Service, 1989), shown on page 9. It lists the various primary classroom settings and occasions in which literacy learning takes place, such as storytime, writing, independent reading, and informal settings, providing an organized way for teachers to record their anecdotal notes of various activities.

Many portfolios in the early grades also included running records, sometimes referred to as miscue analyses (Davidson, 1985). Running records (see page 10) systematically document students' oral reading in a way that helps teachers become aware of the strategies children use in their efforts to make meaning out of print. As a student reads a chosen text, the teacher follows along on a xeroxed copy, indicating the number of overall errors that the student makes, the number of words the student reads incorrectly but substitutes with meaningful alternatives, the number of words that the student omits, the number of times the student is able to self-correct, the fluency of the reading, and the number of times the student needs teacher assistance. This is an especially helpful tool to guide instruction when students are beginning to be independent readers but are still struggling with different aspects of fluency.

At the Bronx New School, running records were kept at monthly intervals, providing a comprehensive picture of the specific skills and strategies students were developing as they progressed through different texts. The information obtained from running records was especially helpful in demonstrating reading progress not revealed by standardized tests. Karen Khan, the school's Reading Support teacher, recalls her work with one student:

> The documentation that I kept of my work with Roberto showed the ways he grew as a reader that were not evident from his scores on the reading tests. He was a third grader who was not yet fluent in his reading and he got overwhelmed by all those long, boring, complicated paragraphs on the city/state reading test. As a result he received a very low score. The running records I had regularly kept on him, however, demonstrated the changes he had made over the year and showed how much he actually could do. They documented how he was recognizing more words, how his miscues [mistakes, errors] were becoming increasingly related to the meaning of the text, how he was correcting himself more frequently, and how he was reading longer, more complicated passages. This reassured me, as well as Roberto and his family, about his progress and gave me concrete suggestions for how they could support his reading at home.

The Primary Language Record, [PLR], (Barrs, et. al, 1988) was yet another choice of literacy assessments in student portfolios. Its framework for observing and recording

Sheet A

Observations Of Reading Behavior

NAME _____ YEAR _____

AGE _____

	Date	Comment
Recognizes name		
Prints own name		
Can indicate cover of book		
Can indicate front of book		
Can indicate back of book		
Can indicate title		
Can indicate print		
Can indicate picture		
Knows where to start reading		
Knows which way to go		
Know to move left to right and return to beginning of next line		
Knows first word		
Knows last line		
One to one matching -becoming established -well established -uses as cue for self-correction		
Can indicate a word		
Can indicate the space between the words		
Can indicate a letter		
Can indicate a capital letter, e.g. M		
Can indicate a small letter, e.g. m		
Can match capital and small letters		
Knows some letters		
Letter identification test score		
Can indicate a full stop		
Can indicate a comma		
Can indicate a question mark		
Knows some basic vocabulary		
Word test score		
Is writing letters		
Is writing parts of words		
Is writing words properly sequenced		
Is writing groups of words		
Is writing simple sentences		

Settings for Assessment of Children's Reading in Primary Classrooms

Setting	Examples of child's activities
Storytime: teacher reads to class (response to story-line; child's comments, questions, elaborations)	
Independent reading: book-time (nature of books child chooses or brings in; process of selecting; quiet or social reading)	
Writing: (journal, stories, alphabet, dictation)	
Reading Group/Individual: (oral reading strategies; discussion of text; responses to instruction)	
Informal settings: (use of language in play, jokes, storytelling, conversation)	
Books and print as resource: (use of books for projects; attention to signs, labels, names; locating information)	
Other:	

TA = Teacher Assistance
// = Pause

Child's name M
Teacher M.J. Grade
Date 5/11/87

FLY WITH ME Teacher read title 1st Read

W TA
Fly with me. isolated "w"

TA
Fly with me//up//and up.

Fly with me down//and down. looked back to page 2 Re-read sentence on page 2 several times, then redd "and"

Fly with me into the//clouds looked at picture

TA TA TA
and around and around. looked back to page 2 but this time couldn't remember "and"

Long pause // Let's go fly over
Look out for ^ the hill. added "over"

Let's go fly over a river
Look out for ^ the bridge. added "over"

Let's not fly /omit again
Look out for the ground!

(40 words)

text	substitution
with	"w"
and	—
around	—
look	let's
out	go
for	fly

text	substitution
the	a
bridge	river
ground	again

children's literacy progress informed teachers about the full spectrum of the developmental stages involved in becoming a reader. The *PLR*'s scales noting points of growth along the literacy continuum, described in the previous chapter, chart children's progress as they become increasingly independent and experienced with many kinds of texts. These scales helped Bronx New School teachers think about and characterize children's progress, offering helpful ways of describing what a child was able to do on the road to reading. Scale ratings were reported on the mid- and end-of-year narratives. The score given to any particular student was arrived at on the basis of evidence gathered through teacher observation and documentation of that student's growth during the school year.

Student Work Samples

The heart of the Bronx New School portfolios were collections of student work selected by teachers and students to represent a range of media from all discipline areas. Writing samples demonstrated literacy development while journals of numbers and accompanying problem-solving narratives showed progression in mathematical thinking. Drawings or photos of art projects, along with reports of science experiments and other projects, provided information about learning as it took place across the disciplines. Photos of three dimensional work unable to be saved -- block buildings, woodworkings, cooking, constructions of bridges or buildings -- and photos of students engaged in activities with others -- reading, tending to animals, sports, music, or dramatic play -- gave a sense of each student's interests and learning styles. Items were dated to give a sense of progress over time.

At the end of each year the portfolios were reviewed to ensure they contained adequate information about all discipline areas as well as about the uniqueness of the child. Teachers selected a representative sample of items from each of the areas of study at the three intervals (beginning, middle, and end of the year) to save for the following year. These were selected to show growth over time, to include literacy, mathematics, science and social studies projects, to show the range of the student's work and his or her particular strengths. In total, about 12 to 20 items might be selected to document these various aspects of children's learning. In the early grades, especially, the teacher's observations of literacy development through checklists, profiles, and running records would be included in the pass-along portfolio. The remaining items were then sent home for families to keep.

Student-Kept Records

Children kept records of their reading and writing, their interdisciplinary projects, and their responses to teacher/student conferences. All students kept logs of their reading listing what they read, and sometimes also when they read it, and what they thought about it. These took a variety of forms, including lists kept in notebooks, on oaktag bookmarks, or on teacher-designed forms.

Reading logs provided continuity and a sense of concrete accomplishment for students, as well as instructionally useful information for the teacher about who was reading what. This enabled teachers to chart students' reading interests and the levels of difficulty of the books individual children were tackling, to inform their suggestions of books to students and the activities they designed to help students progress. Since the Bronx New School did not rely on conventional methods of charting reading progress - basal readers, workbooks, or ability-tracked reading groups, this record-keeping was also especially useful in demonstrating to families how students' reading was coming along. It also helped students recognize what they were learning (a real motivation) while it gave them a sense of responsibility, control and ownership of their work.

This approach to student-kept records was tried in some classes with other subjects as well. For example, some teachers used math journals. They would assign three or four problems at the beginning of the week which required thought, time, and the ability to use an array of skills and understandings. The problems often had more than one right answer. Students would work them out in their journals and share them at the end of the week. Math notebooks would also be used to record student-invented math problems or teacher-designed individualized problems which students would complete during open-ended math activity times.

Some teachers also had children keep project folders. These would describe what students did during the daily classroom time allocated for project work, the questions that arose, how they proceeded to answer those questions, and what they learned as a result. The ant farm investigation undertaken by one of the younger students documents his ability to make careful observations and to begin to draw inferences from them. The student drew the farm and its tunnels on subsequent days and met to conference with the teacher about what he had noticed. The teacher recorded a brief summary of his observations and conclusions.

Children also shared these records of their work with their classmates, so that they became exposed to a wider world of information and ideas. Each child received questions and comments from classmates which clarified their thinking and stimulated new directions for work. This developed a shared body of knowledge for the class without everyone having to do the same thing.

Akeem's story, told below, demonstrates how this documentation approach actually worked in practice, in this case for a child who was struggling to find a positive niche in school. For this student, careful observations called attention to previously hidden strengths that were then used by his teacher as a teaching resource that greatly enhanced Akeem's learning and self-confidence.

Akeem's Story

Akeem came to the Bronx New School when he was a third grader, after three difficult years in a troubled, overcrowded school. Standardized teaching and testing in that environment had already marked him as a failure. His records indicated that he had scored in the lowest percentiles on the norm-referenced reading and math tests administered to all New York City public school children. In addition, his official school cumulative record folder was filled with checks in the unsatisfactory columns. No other information about him was available. Only by accident, at an informal conversation during a district meeting, did his teacher, Susan Gordon, learn of his troubled past - that he had been suspended from his former school for throwing a desk at a teacher.

What prompted this behavior remained a mystery throughout Akeem's first days at the Bronx New School. But difficulties soon became apparent, motivating his teachers to find out more about him. Akeem had intense swings in mood, almost what appeared to be two distinct postures - one always in constant motion, the other quiet, gentle, and still. He loved to run, jump, climb, and stretch. Sometimes the school setting seemed almost to constrict him; his long legs and large hands often bumping into things, his hands always tapping his thighs or his cheeks or playing with a paper clip, rubber band, eraser. At other times he seemed quiet, closed, almost sorrowful. His head would hang low, his shoulders hunched. At these times it would not take much to move him to tears.

At classroom meetings Akeem fidgeted endlessly, talking, singing, popping his cheeks, or humming. Sometimes he sneered, grumbled, or muttered to himself; sometimes he teased, smiled, or giggled with others. When frustrated, he would throw things: pieces of cork, plastic, cardboard. His forehead, brows, and mouth would all scowl simultaneously. When reprimanded, he often denied what he had done, stomping angrily out of the room in a dark, stormy cloud. On several occasions, in fits of frustration, he overturned chairs or threw other large objects, frightening and angering those around him.

Akeem was openly considered a disruptive presence in the class, particularly during group meetings. There was an implicit expectation that he would do something to disturb everyone. This was lost on no one, least of all Akeem.

Susan,[2] desperate to understand and contain his behavior, observed Akeem carefully, noting the contexts in which he lost control. She soon discovered that he could not independently read or write and that he had difficulty with even simple mathematics; that his disruptive outbursts generally began when he was called upon to use these skills. From this evidence she inferred a number of possible rationales for Akeem's behavior: That he was

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[2] Teachers in the Bronx New School were known to the children and parents by their first names. We have preserved that convention here.

trying to avoid participating in activities at which he was convinced he would fail; that he hoped his disruption of an activity would cause it to cease; or that rather than being known for *not* being good at something (school-related learning), Akeem preferred to be known for being good at *something*, (in this case that something was being "the disrupter").

Together with other school staff, Susan searched for ways to help Akeem. Since Akeem's disruptive behavior bouts seemed to correlate with assignments to do things he could *not* do, they hypothesized that the logical way to avoid further disruptions was to involve him instead in what he actually *could* do. What those things were, they didn't know. They suspected that Akeem didn't know either.

Susan began by allowing Akeem to choose his work from the many rich and varied interdisciplinary activities available in his flexibly-scheduled, workshop-style classroom. It was organized into centers of interest that had tables, a meeting area for discussions, a library area, shelves filled with math games, blocks, paints, clay, sand, water, wood, fabrics, and tools. It also had materials for cooking, for construction, and for "messing about" (Hawkins, 1965) in science: found objects, wires, batteries, bulbs, magnets, household chemicals and an array of recycled junk. This variety of materials was regularly available.

Susan structured the classroom around several long work periods every day. These gave opportunities for Akeem and his classmates to involve themselves deeply and for extended spans of time in areas of their particular interest. She encouraged the students to be active, to find their own avenues of self-expression, and to revisit the activities of their interests whenever they chose. Her classroom learning environment was structured to help students get to know each other's ideas through conversation and to utilize each other's knowledge through peer teaching.

The plan to help Akeem also included giving him special permission to make his own schedule and excusing him from the group meetings which he had continually disrupted. Gordon observed him closely as he explored the classroom, tested things out, and settled into a few types of activities - legos, building blocks, drawing, and junk sculpture - ones that captured his imagination and focused his energies. Building began to consume his days. His fidgeting fingers quickly became adept at putting small pieces together, crafting interesting objects and designs. Gordon fueled his interests by providing regular opportunities to pursue these activities as well as materials, resources, conversation and other related experiences to enrich and extend them. She connected to what he already knew, helped uncover his curiosity and questions, advised and supported him in their pursuit. This approach strengthened his skills and expanded his knowledge.

Over the course of several months Akeem built a set of aviation vehicles accompanied by a book illustrating the history of flight; a set of action figures with a companion descriptive catalogue; a series of lego buildings and drawings reproducing important architecture in New York City. An excerpt from his action figures catalog, "Man after Man" (see page 16), illustrates not only his sophisticated artistic ability, but also his ability to plan

and sustain an extended, tightly organized piece of work. The 28 pages in his book, one of which is reproduced on page 17, follow a common pattern: a highly detailed sketch of a character with some unique characteristics, described in a carefully-printed caption that explains the character's traits, habitat (these range from the Amazon to Greenland, from the rain forest to the treetops and the mountains), and interesting facts or questions: "Did you know SixFist is BarBell's brother?" "Did you know Ice Gadget pays for the damages of good/bad battles?" Akeem's capacity to plan, organize, and draw connections, to maintain correspondence between his drawings and text, to create a logic for a world populated by innovative characters is clear in this work.

At times Akeem was so involved in these projects that he chose to give up recess to continue working on them. One staff member who supervised children during lunchtime recollects:

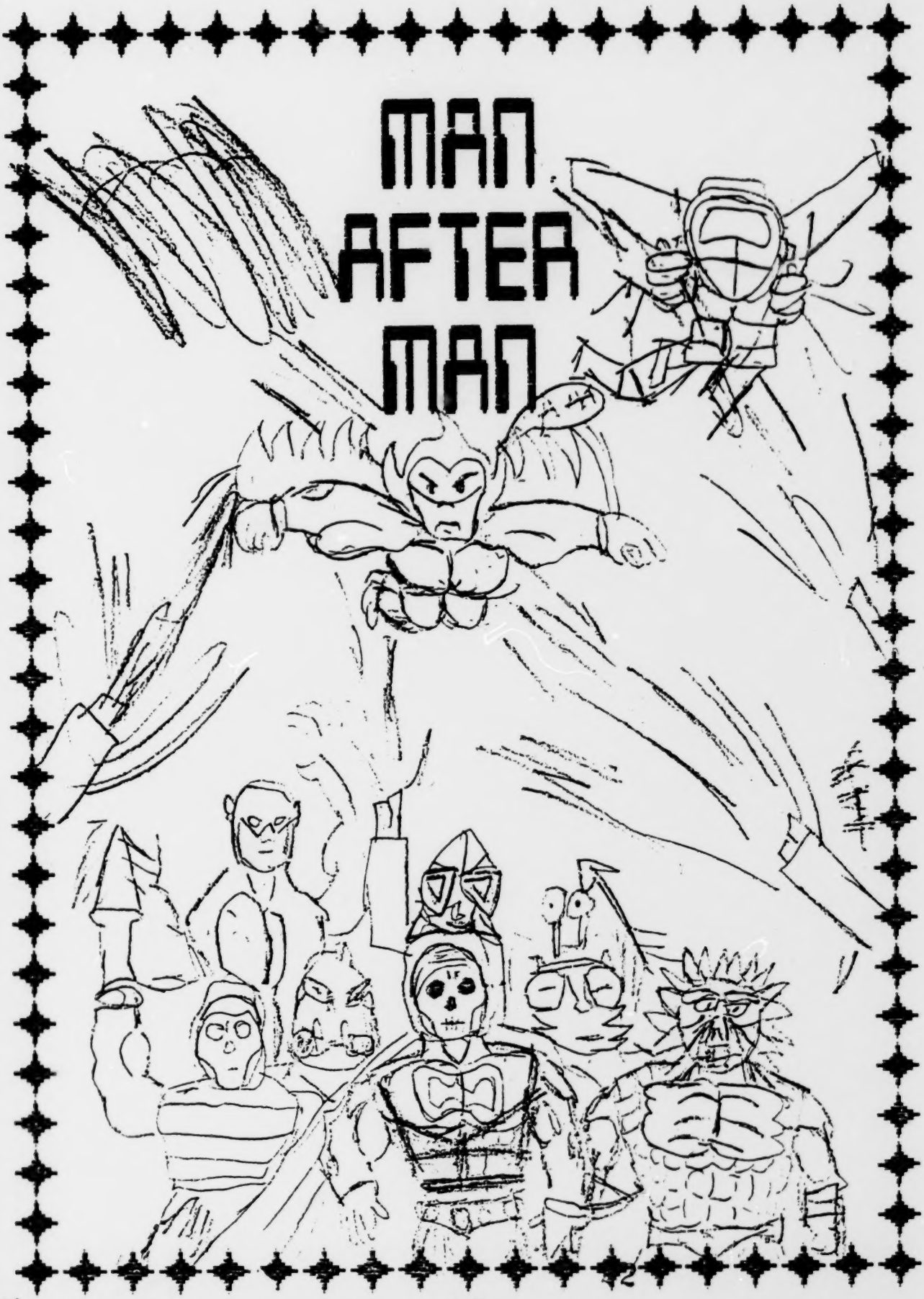
> I'll never forget an image of Akeem standing at the lunchroom door, wolfing down his sandwich, hopping from one foot to another, waiting for his teacher to pick him up so that he could return to his classroom to finish *writing* (!!) his book on the history of flight.

Susan kept track of Akeem's progress through regular entries in her journal, documenting what he did, how he did it, the issues that arose for him in the course of his work, the areas of his strengths, and those areas in which he needed help. In one journal entry, after Akeem had been in her class for several months, she wrote:

> During a unit on space he constructed a space shuttle out of a seltzer bottle, cardboard pieces and other items. He referred to books for help with his work. He even sat through a meeting without disrupting the rest of the class. Others now seek him out for advice on building. It appears that he is valued for his talents.

Based on what she learned from her careful observations and from reflecting on the documentation in her daily records, Susan not only helped Akeem to change, she changed her thinking and her teaching as well. She came to realize that a classroom limited only to traditional forms of academic expression excludes different types of children as well as different types of knowledge. She became poignantly aware that children who have diverse strengths and interests often feel that because there is no room in school for the kinds of activities they value, there is literally no room for them either. By demonstrating that other forms of work - paint, clay, construction, etc. - are just as important as math or as writing, Gordon extended the range of what was valued. As a result, not only Akeem, but other children as well, began to understand the inclusive message. They began to feel that there was a place for them in the classroom and the school.

The student teacher who worked in his classroom during this time reflects on the changes she observed in Akeem as he experienced Susan's classroom environment:


MAN
AFTER
MAN

Spike
Spike lives in the forest. He got his spikes from a spike trap. He is the leader of a team named the Slaughters.
300 Years Hence

> There are children who "can" and children who "can't" here just as there are in any given classroom. But the difference in this room is, if Akeem is not a writer, he *is* a builder. And Stephen, who happens to be a writer, is *not* a builder. There is value placed on each individual's abilities alongside a concern for, and an educational emphasis placed on, overcoming their current inabilities. No one here is a "failure." Everyone is an acknowledged success in one area or another. A room without the abundance of art supplies and collection of odds and ends that support his self expression would exclude Akeem. His experience in his other school proves how hard this can be on a child (Miller, 1990, p. 32, 21).

As Akeem received recognition for his work, his demeanor began to change. The surly look began to fade. The disruptive episodes all but disappeared. His desire to be part of his classroom surfaced. He began to choose to stay with the group for meeting times. He even started to participate in quiet reading time (a period during the day when students selected their own books and read independently) and to allow the reading specialist to work with him. It appeared that the validation he had experienced from doing what he was good at transferred to his most vulnerable areas. His interests had been strengthened and unleashed by having the opportunities to pursue them (Carini, 1986). He began to take risks, try what he couldn't do, ask questions when he didn't understand.

Akeem's strengths, resources, and areas in need of support began to emerge as his teacher learned about him through her ongoing observations of his language and his work. The details she recorded revealed Akeem's strengths and affected the way she thought about him. She stopped reacting to him as "the troublemaker" and began to regard him as a builder, a doer, a maker of things; as artistic and adept at mechanical tasks. She also had greater insights into his learning style -- his interests, his tastes, his approaches, his pace, and the areas in which he needed greatest support. She used this information to support him as he struggled with reading and other areas of learning that he found most difficult.

In reading, for example, her ongoing assessment efforts pointed out to Susan that while Akeem had a grasp of phonetic skills, he had little understanding of what he was reading. Because he relied on phonics almost exclusively, he would often get mired in the text and unable to decode the print, lacking other strategies that could support him, such as using pictures for clues, reading on to the end of the sentence, substituting a word that would make sense, looking to the syntax of the sentence. His lack of resources for getting meaning from reading, combined with his generally low level of self-esteem, left him frustrated and angry and kept him from persisting to take the risks needed to learn new things.

In addition to these observations which diagnosed the areas in which Akeem needed support, Susan also discovered that whenever Akeem began a book, he was most interested in its illustrations. Even when he was supposed to be reading the text, he would generally fixate on the pictures, noting the most intricate of details in them. This understanding led her to guide him towards books that contained beautiful detailed drawings. She learned to allow him plenty of time for soaking up the pictures before attempting the words. It was this

approach and these kinds of books that Akeem eventually began to seek out independently, that engaged his interest and attention, and that ultimately helped him break into independent and fluent reading. The reading support teacher, Karen Khan, gives a sense of how she worked with Akeem in these excerpts from her daily notes:

> Today we read two chapters. I read the first page. He went on. He built momentum as he went along. I provided unknown words at first. Then I suggested several strategies: pointing to the words as he goes along (sometimes he needs this but sometimes he doesn't); going ahead to try the rest of the sentence when he doesn't know the word; using the pictures for clues. I also pointed out different endings of root words such as "er", "ing", and "ed". At the height of his momentum, he was almost reading fluently! Then he slowed down. It seems that he needs to concentrate so hard that he gets exhausted.

As teachers worked with Akeem in this way, he integrated new understandings, new ideas, new competencies, and new skills into his prior ones. He began to uncover hidden strengths and talents. He began to actually enjoy school (one teacher observed him skipping his way down the block to school one morning) and to eagerly seek out new opportunities for work. His feelings about school, taken from a yearbook at the end of his fifth grade year, had changed:

> If you don't know something in another school it's your problem. Here you can work it out. Instead of reading about something, you do it. And because you want to learn about something, you learn more (The Bronx New School, 1991, p. 15).

In spite of the changes that took place in Akeem's learning, his standardized test scores did not improve dramatically over the three years that Bronx New School teachers knew him. Although they increased slightly each year, he essentially remained a low test-scorer. The tests did not reveal what a thinker and questioner he had become; what a risk-taker he was; what an inventive, artistic sculptor and drawer he was; what a gentle, funny, considerate person he could be. They did not demonstrate his progress or give information that would support further teaching for him. They did not show, for instance, that over time he had tapped into many more reading strategies than he had utilized before; that he was able to read a wider range of materials with greater success; that he had begun to try instead of giving up when attempting something that did not come easily; that he was building resources to carry him further in his struggle with literacy and learning. The only story they told was that Akeem did not answer the multiple choice questions on tests in the way that inauthentic configuration of normed questions posited that an "average" third or fourth or fifth grader should.

Fortunately, the observations of Akeem documented by his teacher and the samples of work collected in his portfolio *do* reveal these aspects of growth and development not demonstrated by the mass-administered standardized tests. They provide information about

many different types of knowledge as well as many different ways of acquiring it. They give a fuller, more contextualized picture of change. They keep track of the process, expose the nuance, and provide information to those charged with helping the child make the learning journey more productive.

Akeem is currently completing the eighth grade in a local junior high school. While academics are still not easy for him, his effort and regular attendance at school are reflected by his record of practically all A's on his spring report car. He understands his own strengths, and is motivated by his own interests. These understandings appear to serve him well as he makes plans to attend a high school oriented towards art and design. He hopes to become an architect or an engineer. Susan's ability to help him find himself, with the aid of the array of lenses she could employ to gain insight, certainly made an important difference in his success as a learner and a doer.

The Descriptive Review of a Child

The *Descriptive Review of a Child* (Prospect Center, 1986) is another assessment strategy used at the Bronx New School that helped Akeem's teachers in their struggle to find ways of supporting his growth. In the review, faculty collectively engage in a structured, descriptive process for addressing an issue, question, or concern about a child. Its creators at the Prospect Center in Vermont describe the review as follows:

> The primary purpose of the *Descriptive Review of a Child* is to bring together varied perspectives, in a collaborative process, in order to describe a child's experience within the school setting. An underlying assumption of the Process is that each child is active in seeking to make sense of her or his experiences. By describing the child as fully, and in as balanced a way as possible, we begin to gain access to the child's modes of thinking and learning and to see their world from their point of view: what catches their attention; what arouses their wonder and curiosity; what sustains their interest and purpose. To have access to that understanding of a child or children, offers a guide to the education of the child's fullest potential. Recommendations can be made which draw upon and support the child's strengths, interests, and power to make and do things.
>
> The perspectives through which the child is described are multiple, to insure a balanced portrayal of the person, that neither over-emphasizes some current "problem" nor minimizes an ongoing difficulty. The description of the child addresses the following facets of the person as these characteristics are expressed within the classroom setting at the present time:
>
> the child's physical presence and gesture
> the child's disposition
> the child's relationships with other children and adults
> the child's activities and interests

the child's approach to formal learning
the child's strengths and vulnerabilities (Prospect Center, 1986, p. 26-27).

The presenter is most often the child's classroom teacher, although teachers at the Bronx New School eventually progressed to having several co-presenters who had unique and important understandings of the child, either from different perspectives or from different time periods. Some schools also include the child's parents or family members in the actual review itself.

Prior to their presentations, a previously determined chairperson (this position is always rotated) discusses and defines a focusing issue or question with the presenter(s). For example, the focusing theme for Akeem was his two distinct postures - motion and stillness - and how they could best be accommodated in the classroom. Finding the focusing issue was not always easy but led to thinking, discussion and reflection among teachers that in and of itself often led to new insights. As Schon (1983) suggests in ***The Reflective Practitioner***:

> Problems of professional practice do not present themselves ready-made, but rather the (practice) situation is complex and uncertain, and there is a problem in finding the problem (p. 129).

Prior to the *Review*, the chairperson of the review process obtains background knowledge and history of the child relevant to the issue to be discussed. The chairperson uses this information in a brief opening presentation of his/her findings. This opening presentation also includes a reminder to participants of the *Descriptive Review* format, of its protocol -- no gossip, no innuendo, no judgmental language -- and of its purpose -- to support the growth of a child by focusing on his/her strengths. A note taker is assigned to document the entire process for the school's and the child's permanent records.

To verify, validate and illustrate each description, the presenter(s) setup a display of the child's work for the review. After they speak, the chair gives an overview of their presentations by highlighting themes and issues which emerged from the portrait of the child the presenters constructed. Then other participants are invited to comment and reflect on what they have heard in a round-robin fashion (no cross-conversations allowed). The chair once again reflects back to all what has been said and invites the presenter(s) to respond, if they choose. Finally, participants are requested to make suggestions about changes in approaches, classroom environment, or teaching practices that might better address the needs of the child.

Rather than looking at the child as the problem and expecting the child to make all the changes, the *Descriptive Review* process calls for the school to be responsive to the needs of the individual child and to assume responsibility for problems and their remedies. This is not to say that the child's responsibility is ignored. It is indeed addressed, but cast in a different light - of building capacity through support of strengths rather than of remediating weaknesses or punishing shortcomings.

An excerpt from a *Descriptive Review* of Akeem gives a feel for what this all means:

Akeem's favorite activities are drawing and construction of all kinds. He has built space shuttles from seltzer bottles, cardboard cartons, straws, tape, bottle tops and the like and created a robot with moving parts from similar materials. He also likes to draw. His drawings are expressive of a young child, with a creative and imaginative approach. He is fascinated by powerful machinery such as space ships, airplanes, electronic robots. He also enjoys the more fanciful side of such things and has spent time constructing a Bat Cave, Bat Mobile and Bat Helicopter. He is deeply involved with ideas of power, strength, force, and defense. He tends to favor materials he is accustomed to using and with which he has some skill. If he does not like what he has created, he expresses anger and disappointment. He instantly crumbles it into a tight wad and rams it into the wastebasket. Sometimes he will begin work again immediately. At other times, he will simply not try anymore.

His approach to a new topic is typified by the following example: On the day Akeem's teacher introduced outer space to the class as the next area of study, she spent some time talking with everyone about space travel, the stars, planets, and the like. She also made many books on these topics available to the children and spoke about them in detail. Right after the discussion Akeem went directly to the construction corner of the room. He searched through the cartons for material and began building almost immediately. He seemed to have a picture in his mind. He worked deliberately. Once his work began to resemble a space vehicle, he opened a book on the space shuttle for a reference. This shuttle was the focus of Akeem's work periods while the class studied space. He also did a blueprint of it. While working on both parts of the project, he used books as references, relying primarily on labeled diagrams to help him. He also built a plastic plane that actually flew. Its body was a seltzer bottle, and its wings were made from plastic odds and ends. He rigged a rubber band in the bottle and attached it to the plane's propeller. When the propeller was spun and the rubber band twisted tight, the plane flew.

Akeem approaches most subjects as he did outer space. He appears most comfortable when he can, at some level, physically construct a subject or process for himself. He is very uncomfortable with reading and writing. There seems to be something about a page full of print that fails to connect with him. These processes offer no pieces he can handle and try to fit together. The same difficulty is seen in his math work. One day, he was trying to do division problem and looked completely lost. He brightened up when presented with unifix cubes. Having the bits and pieces to handle there, as in his construction work, made what had seemed impossible possible.

He is increasingly able to do this for himself - transform what is difficult for him into a medium he can handle more comfortably. He made a game for multiplication that had pieces he could hold in his hands and move around and

> fit or match together. He also needs physical involvement in a task to help him figure it out. When figuring out the diameter of a circle, he crawled around a taped circle on the meeting area rug with a tape measure, to get the diameter.
>
> Akeem cannot seem to truly learn while sitting still or as part of a group. He needs to be able to move about to make that imaginative or intuitive leap. He is an active, strong, but vulnerable child. His continued presence in the classroom (he is never absent) testifies to his enduring efforts to fit into this place called school.

The kind of observation called for by the *Descriptive Review* format offers understandings which set the tone for a learning environment providing for the needs of each child, respecting the individuality of each child, making each child visible. This is especially powerful in schools that serve diverse communities and that are endeavoring to include all children in the ranks of successful learners. A teacher explains:

> The value of an education will never be missed by visible and included children. They will be too excited by their own wonderful ideas to give up on learning (Miller, 1990, p. 35).

The chair concludes the *Descriptive Review* with a summation of what has taken place. New perspectives on the child, as well as new ideas for work with the child, are gained by all. The notes of the event are placed in the child's folder, providing the school with a written document which becomes part of its permanent record.

The *Descriptive Review* process, through observation, documentation, and the presentation of these observations, enables the people charged with supporting the growth of children to gather and organize empirical information for the purpose of assessing growth and disclosing new meanings. It is not an expedient assessment instrument. It requires preparation time, time to actually do the review (one and a half to two hours), and administrative juggling for the time to be arranged either during or after the school day. Despite these difficulties however, school staff who have participated in the process have described it as time well spent. One teacher said:

> As a child is described through the *Descriptive Review* process we can literally see the child emerge before us. We get a sense of his physicality, his tastes, his style, his pace, his interests, and his particular strengths. We can note continuities and repeating themes in the child's work that provide us with direction as to how to support him.

Another teacher notes how the time spent on discussing the issues of one child can enhance understandings of all children:

> The *Descriptive Review* process, by focusing in depth on the issues of one particular child, gives us understandings and deeper sensitivity to the intricacies of the process of growth and development for all children. In this sense, it is time well spent. Through it we learn about teaching and about learning in general.

There are few occasions in most schools in which a group of adults convenes to talk about what might be done to support a child who is struggling. Teams are sometimes convened when a child is in trouble, when a special education placement is sought, or when a transfer or expulsion is considered. This kind of review, however, stands in stark contrast to the kind of discussion about a child that typically occurs at such a meeting, where the focus is on the child's deficits and inabilities, on the inconveniences to the school and teachers to try to educate him in an inclusive setting, on the behavioristic schemes that are to be created to treat the child's problems (remedial work if the problems are academic; rewards and punishments if the problems are seen as behavioral). By contrast, this review is as wide-ranging as the interests of the child and the vantage points of the adults; is explicitly educative and constructive; and is focused on bending the knowledge of teachers and the capacities of the school to the renewed support of the child.

The *Descriptive Review* is more than an assessment instrument for student growth. While it describes the nuance and details of a child's growth, its real power lies in its ability to directly affect the ways in which helping adults can better support that growth. In addition, it serves as a record of school practice and it documents the discussion of important staff development issues. Finally, it serves to build a sense of community in the school as a whole because it provides a common language, common perspective, and common framework for teaching and learning.

Reporting Systems

Progress reports, family conferences, and other communication vehicles were developed at BNS to share the vivid and detailed information about student work and progress collected through the assessments with families and the wider school community.

Progress Reports

In lieu of traditional report cards listing a set of letter or number grades, a progress report was prepared for each student twice during the course of the school year. The progress report is a narrative summary of growth, describing each child's development over time. Informed by teachers' detailed observations and documentation of students' work, it is meant to be used in much the same manner as the *Descriptive Review* -- to be descriptive not evaluative (judgmental), to focus on the child through the lens of strength, and to frame vulnerabilities as areas in need of support rather than as problems to be remediated. A family

conference to discuss the contents of the report was held soon after each was completed - at the end of the first term, in February, and at the end of the school year, in June. A space at the end of the report was reserved for comments from both the student and the family about any aspect of the report and for sharing additional ideas or information.

These reports were a continual work in progress. As a result of family input and teacher dialogue, they underwent changes every year, evolving from a combination narrative and checklist, complete with a numbered assessment code for each discipline, into a full narrative, minus the checklists and assessment code, without the separation between the disciplines. (See pages 26-28).

These changes were made after the first year of the school, when faculty discovered that families and students reacted to the assessment codes as if they were grades. Although the ratings were meant only to give a sense of each child's place in the continuum of development, families interpreted them quite differently. They responded to the assessment code as if their child had been evaluated and this caused them to subsequently lose sight of the true nature and purpose of the reports - that they were intended to give a detailed portrait of the child, framed in the perspective of the continuum of growth and development, and presented through the light of support, not judgment. An example of this positive way of framing a child's development can be seen in this excerpt from Kevin's* report:

> **II. Social/Emotional Development:** Kevin is well-liked by both adults and his peers. He expresses himself freely and with confidence both during the group meeting and 1-1. He is most focused in his work and productive when working with a small number of children in close proximity to a supportive adult. His difficulty in controlling the impulsive urges to touch other children's work frequently instigates a conflict, as does his tendency to become easily distracted during meeting and work times. Both his classmates and I will continue to support his growth in these areas. Kevin remains always an "idea person," not only with regard to his own work, but in terms of his ability to act as a catalyst for ideas for the rest of the classroom.

Framing the information in the perspective of a growth continuum was particularly helpful to parents who wanted or needed information regarding the question, "How is my child doing in relation to other children his/her age?" This need for comparative information was especially prevalent in families whose children were progressing differently than the what they thought of as "the norm". They needed to know if their children were "ok" and if not, what was being done to help them?

For example, many families worried a lot about their child's reading. This is understandably a highly-charged concern, as the consequences of problems in this area can be literally life-threatening for some students (Kohl, 1991). As in many schools using a developmental and holistic approach to reading instruction rather than sequenced basal readers, some families at the Bronx New School were apprehensive about how to know their

THE BRONX NEW SCHOOL
REPORT FORM

Name: _____ _____ Date: _____
Teacher: _____ Grade: _____

ASSESSMENT CODE: The following code has been developed to describe your child's progress:

N/A Not Applicable
1) Needs a lot of help; a serious concen
2) Needs reminders; making progress
3) Handles this well
4) This is an area of strength

I. Projects, themes, special interests: please refer to the above assessment code. Also, see accompanying curriculum letter.

------- Asks appropriate questions
------- Actively seeks to make sense of things; experiments
------- Takes risks with new things, new skills, new experiences
_____ Observant, notices details, watches carefully and patiently
_____ Participates in class discussions

COMMENTS:

II. Social and Behavioral: The following issues, which we have discussed in conferences, cover important aspects of our child as a learner and as a member of the school community. Please refer to the assessment code.

_____ Relationships with classmates and schoolmates
_____ Working in groups, sharing with others
_____ Relationship with adults and other "authorities"
_____ Handling of regular daily classroom rules and routines
_____ Responsibility towards materials, clothes, environment
_____ Focus, concentration, sticking to a task over time, attentiveness to work
_____ Standing up for her/his own rights, protecting her/himself in appropriate ways
_____ Helping out others, sympathy for others
_____ Handling work-related frustration, acceptance of mistakes

COMMENTS:

III. Language Development and Self Expression: Please refer to the assessment code.

_____ Comfort describing ideas, feeling, events
_____ Skill at describing ideas, feelings, events
_____ Attentiveness to what others are saying
_____ Ability and interest in conversation
_____ Vocabulary

COMMENTS:

IV. Reading: Reading is NOT a subject matter. It is a tool of learning. The attached sheets describe the different stages of literacy development. All of these stages are important in becoming a reader.

Your child can presently be described as _____ reader.

Titles of books read recently:

COMMENTS ON READING:

V. Writing: Writing development is intricately linked to reading development. As your child's reading skills develop, so will his/her writing skills. As your child's writing skills develop, so will her/his reading skills. Please see the attached sheet to describe your child's stage of development in writing.

Your child is at Writing Stage _____.

Please refer to the assessment code for the following items:

_____ Use of writing time
_____ Thinks up ideas for writing
_____ Attitude towards writing
_____ Handwriting
_____ Drawings

COMMENTS:

VI. Math Assessment: Please see the attached sheet to explain the stages of development in mathematical thinking.

Your child is at Stage _____ as a mathematical thinker.

_____ Interest in the use of numbers in the world around him/her
_____ Interest in connection between things
_____ Sorting and classifying
_____ Sees patterns and relationships
_____ Understands appropriate mathematical terms
_____ Counting
_____ Computation
_____ Estimation
_____ Measurement - non-standard: with cubes, blocks, string, etc.
_____ Measurement - standard: with rulers, inches, centimeters
_____ Surveys and graphs
_____ Application of math skills to other projects and activities

COMMENTS:

VII. Homework: Please refer to the assessment code.

_____ Turns in homework on time and completed
_____ Puts in effort - creative, imaginative, beyond what is required
_____ Done neatly and carefully

TEACHER'S SIGNATURE _____

DIRECTOR'S SIGNATURE _____

CHILD'S SIGNATURE _____

PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S SIGNATURE _____

_____

COMMENTS:

Please return this report with your signatures and comments. We will make a copy of it for your records after it is signed.

children were progressing properly. The process was different than they remembered it and this difference often made them uneasy, even though memories of their own schooling were frequently unpleasant.

Families experienced even more anxiety if their children who were not reading independently by the beginning of the 2nd grade year, which is not an uncommon phenomenon for many children within the normal band of development (Bussis et al., 1985), given the differential development of children's visual/ perceptual skills. In these cases, the BNS approach to documentation, developmental assessment, and reporting was particularly important, as the experience of Margaret and her mother demonstrates.

Margaret, who at the time of this writing is a fifth grader who reads fluently and is a competent student, was slow to move into reading when she was younger. She was an otherwise attentive, inquisitive, and involved student who worked well with others and enjoyed school. She loved listening to books, writing stories in her own "invented" spelling, and making detailed drawings to accompany her works. In spite of evidence that Margaret was progressing, her mother could not help but compare her daughter with the accomplishments of other children who seemed to read better. To make matters even more complicated, Margaret's mother also constantly compared her to her older sister, who when attending their traditional neighborhood school -- replete with work books, basal readers, and ability groups -- had begun to read at a much earlier age.

Teachers tried to assure Margaret's mother that Margaret possessed many strengths and that, in addition, she was making steady gains in reading. Their lengthy progress reports, based on their observational records and the collected samples of Margaret's work, that they shared at numerous family conferences and conversations, helped Margaret's mother see Margaret's strategies for learning and what the teachers were doing to support her. This evidence helped Margaret's mother finally accept that her daughter was indeed making progress; that although she was figuring out how to read more slowly than some others, it did not stop her from learning a lot and loving the process, and that she was being supported sufficiently by her teachers. About mid-way through Margaret's second grade year, several months after she began to read independently, her mother looked back and reflected on the process:

> It wasn't until Margaret became an independent reader that I came to appreciate and understand what the Bronx New School's philosophy really meant -- that each student has a particular way of learning. I couldn't relax enough while Margaret was still struggling to appreciate what the process really entailed. I was too anxious, never having experienced this before. I didn't trust that all along Margaret was learning and putting the pieces together. But having experienced it now, I see how much the conferences, the progress reports, all the evidence collected about what Margaret could do and how she could do it was used by the teachers to support her learning. Now I understand much more about teaching and learning.

This story points to a tension that is inherent in the effort to provide assessment that simultaneously serves the purpose of teaching and learning as well as of public accountability. The tension is between norms of development meant to ensure that student problems will be addressed in a timely fashion and the pressures created by these very same norms to have children move in lockstep fashion, creating dangers of stigmatizing anyone who simply dances to a different rhythm. In many schools it is not unusual for children to be retained in a grade or to be referred to special classes because they have not attained established standards within a determined amount of time, even though this expectation contravenes what is known about actual developmental stages and progress. How to create standards that lessen the chances of students falling through the cracks while also allowing them flexible time frames in which to grow, presents a challenge that schools must sensitively and knowledgeably address. As teachers become increasingly knowledgeable about development and learning and more observant of their students' concrete abilities, they are better able to reconcile these competing concerns, intelligently and productively.

Demonstrating individual growth within the context of the developmental span was the Bronx New School's way of addressing the tension created by accountability concerns. An example of how this was done is the following section of a progress report. As it explains the child's strategies, characteristic approaches, accomplishments, and behaviors, it places this information in the context of the entire continuum of development.

The Bronx New School
La Nueva Escuela del Bronx

Progress Report

Name:Kevin Jones Date: 2-18-91
Teacher: Sue MacMurdy Grade: 2

I. Themes, interests, approaches to learning:

Kevin has a strong interest in discovering "how things work," an interests that has been reflected in his many constructions and electrical and mechanical projects. He is interested in learning about Space and other science themes presented in the "New True Books" and "Magic School Bus" series. Humor is a strong motivating force for learning!

With regard to literacy development, Kevin is well-launched on reading! He uses a broad range of reading strategies -- picture and context clues, sounding out work, and breaking larger words down into smaller, known parts. He rereads to self correct and to maintain momentum. His miscues are generally meaningful, especially when he is tuned into the illustrations -- rather than getting "stuck" on trying to sound out a single word. He can read books from the "I Can Read" series with increased confidence. He continues to be very attuned to all classroom print, charts, and black board messages and is always eager to read them aloud.

In his writing Kevin continues to draw or diagram first, then writes with the purpose of explaining or elaborating his drawing. He writes by sounding-out

words, using classroom print and the other children as spelling resources as well. He borrows ideas and themes from books he's read or from the stories of his friends and then adapts them to his own purposes. Humor frequently plays an important role. He is becoming increasingly aware of the need for punctuation and capitalization. Kevin takes particular delight in dramatizing his stories in puppet shows! He also loves to write on the computer using the Bank Street Writer Program.

Kevin's interest in working with computers carries over into Math where he uses the "Racing Car Math" program on almost a daily basis to practice simple addition and subtraction facts. His number sense has improved greatly. The Hundreds Board has been of particular help to him in working out computational problems and in understanding the relative values of numbers and their relationships. A sense of place value is slowly emerging, although Kevin still prefers to count by 1's, usually with the aid of the Hundreds Board. He can read and interpret story problems and knows when to add or subtract. He can tell time to the hour and 1/2 hour. His sense of spatial relationships is well-developed and he enjoys working out complex construction and mechanical problems using building materials -- like figuring out how to design a working elevator or how to precisely fit a lego train between two platforms or through a tunnel.

Progress reports done in this fashion provide families with detailed information about the child that they know, in some respects better than anyone, from the perspective of the teacher -- what the child is like in the context of peers in the classroom setting. Such reports also give concrete and detailed information about the curriculum and teaching methods used and the child's development with those methods, thus teaching families a lot about both the school's approaches and the child's learning process. This enables them to support their child in a more informed and comprehensive way, something they greatly appreciated. As these parents commented:

> The developmental information in the reports is absolutely essential in order for me to better understand my child's developmental stage. I appreciate the lengthy comments provided by the teachers ("Feedback," 1990, p.1).

> The progress reports which we've received in the last two years clearly and fully described how our son was progressing in school. We really appreciate the time and effort which the teacher puts in these reports ("Feedback," 1991, p. 5).

Family Conferences

Family conferences, a concept developed by the Ackerman Institute and used at several similar New York City schools, followed on the heals of the narrative progress

reports. The family conference is a meeting between the teacher and the significant people in the student's life, including the student. It is a scheduled event, usually lasting anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes (sometimes longer if needed) to discuss the progress of the child as well as questions and concerns of family members. The child's work is on hand so that families have first-hand contact with the concrete evidence of the child's growth over time.

After several years, conferences at the Bronx New School evolved so that the students themselves actually prepared and conducted the conference presentation. Students presented their work to their families, demonstrating how they had grown, what they considered to be their best work, what areas they needed to work on more, what was still "in progress." Student, teacher and family members then discussed the student's future plans.

Information sharing that takes place at a conference is meant to flow in two ways. In addition to the information provided by the school, a substantial part of the family conference is devoted to the family telling teachers about the child's home interests and activities. They talk about the kinds of things people in the family do for relaxation and recreation, the books the child likes to read or the TV programs the child likes to watch, and the responsibilities the child has at home. This kind of information gives valuable clues about how to support learning in school. Connecting home events to school learning in this way is one of the reasons why all family members are generally invited to attend the family/school conference. Sometimes even a sibling can provide insights into the learning style or behavior of a student.

Through the experience of family conferences a sense of community was built at the Bronx New School. Including the child in the conference strengthened trust, demonstrating that there were no behind-the-scenes secrets; that nothing would be done "to" the child without frank, collaborative discussions ending in mutual consent. Inviting the family to be contributors as well as receivers of knowledge increased their trust in the school as well . A parent reflects on this in a letter to her local newspaper:

> [At the Bronx New School] I learned that parent involvement could be very rewarding - not for the right to negotiate which teachers my children would get or to lobby for good evaluation reports about my children, but so I might have the opportunity to help shape the quality of their education, and participate in workshops to learn about a philosophy of education that was different than the one I was raised with. This allowed me to share in my children's school experience and carry over at home the principles taught in school. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to broaden my own network of friends among the parents and staff who shared my vision for our children (Einbender, 1991, p. A15).

Other Communication Contexts

A context of continual communication between teachers, students, families and community provided still other ways in which information about student learning and progress

could be shared. In addition to recording individual children's work, teachers also documented the inquiry process of the class as a whole. Some teachers recorded the content of their daily class meetings that took place prior to and after worktime. On extra large chart paper they would note 1) children's prior knowledge and understandings about a topic, 2) children's questions about it, 3) children's observations from activities or experiments in relation to it, 4) answers and comments in response to the original questions, and 5) new questions arising form the inquiry. This record served to chart the journey of their inquiry. It also served as a document of their curriculum.

Exhibitions of student work were organized regularly at the conclusion of individual classroom studies. Classrooms were temporarily transformed into "museums" containing exhibits of student-made books, experiments, artwork, constructions, puppet shows, videos, musical performances. At exhibitions, students display and explain their work to classmates, schoolmates, family members, and school faculty.

Another way that information got shared was through curriculum letters that teachers wrote and sent home regularly, on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis. This example illustrates how planned activities and studies intersected with inquiry that emerged from students' interests and experiences:

March, 1991

Dear Family,

As I reread my two notebooks of our class meetings this year, I am impressed with the range of interests and knowledge of the class. Our main overall theme is still The Way Things Work and The Environment. The Way Things Work has been studied by building with various materials such as Capsella, Lego Technic, and Construx as well as with found materials. We discussed sinking and floating, the density of metals and liquids and materials and their relationship to the design and function of objects, such as boats. Our trip to the Intrepid inspired an in-depth study of airplanes and aerodynamics. Historic, present and future airplanes were created from cardboard and found materials. We gained a better understanding of simple machines through the exploration of Lego Technic. We talked about and worked with pulleys, gears, belts, and levers.

The Environment, endangered animals and extinction became important when we took our sessions at the Bronx Zoo. Recycling became part of our class. We made paper. A group of children got involved in a Trash Decor Exhibit and Sale, where we made $67. With that money we adopted 2 manatees, an acre of rainforest, and a whale. We began researching some of the answers to questions the class raised. Some children did clay models of endangered species. Man After Man is a theme that has captured the imagination of several children. This is an area inspired by Douglas Dixon, an anthropologist.

He talks about man-altered humans who are adapted to specific environments.

We spend Wednesday afternoons with our wonderful architecture student, Alberto. We visited the new school site several times during its construction and built a scale model of our new room, including furniture.

Lots of other projects have occurred simultaneously throughout the year. Some of the children studied acids and bases. Think Big came back again by popular demand. MC Snake, our class pet, stimulated a lot of questions about snakes and reptiles which led to research and experimenting. The Gulf War inspired us to make a Peace Quilt out of needlepoint.

In math, we studied patterns and functions in numbers. We learned how to read charts and graphs. We learned how to use the hundreds board and multiplication tables. We explored palindromes and math riddles. We tackled division and higher numbers. We are currently working on fractions and decimals. The children have recently decided to have a combined quiet reading and writing time the first hour of the day. They work on different writing interests. We have published two newspapers and are currently working on a magazine.

As you can see, our days are busy. We are a class in constant dialogue and conversation. Our interests and ideas are many, as are the ways in which we express them. It has been a delight and a challenge to work with this class. I look forward to the rest of our year together.

Susan

The school's director also sent a weekly newsletter to families. Besides informing the community about the events taking place in the school, the newsletter regularly discussed broader current educational issues, such as standardized testing, and explained specific educational practices, such as whole language, invented spelling, or new methods for teaching mathematics. An excerpt from one of these helps explain the school's philosophy and how it connects to the curriculum. This kind of reporting does more than provide information about events or seek to reassure parents that "things are under control," it helps to develop parents' deeper understanding of the educational process and of their children's experiences, so that they can become full partners in the enterprise. The sense of a growing community is clear and palpable:

WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL!

I hope your winter vacation was as pleasant as mine was. Now we are back to work with renewed energy and spirit. Our last weeks in December were filled with tremendous parent activity. Parents contributed countless hours of work to raise funds for our school by selling books, calendars, tee-shirts and sweat-shirts, Christmas trees and wreaths. Others worked hard to arrange and

present our Holiday Family Get-Together. Others volunteered in the classrooms to share their family's holiday cultural traditions. We even had someone's aunt present mime workshops to each class in the school.

Thank you everyone! Than you for the $150 collected as gifts for the bus drivers. Thank you for the many donations (educational materials, books and cash) presented to the school as holiday gifts. Thank you for your effort, your caring, your safe-guarding of our unique educational environment. Those of us working for the school feel your trust and faith in us. It inspires us to work even harder to do the very best for the children.

THE HAVING OF WONDERFUL IDEAS:

The vacation respite gave me an opportunity to read and think and deepen my understanding of the work we are doing in our school. You know, we are actually forging a new kind of educational environment -- a school that views the "having of wonderful ideas" as the essence of learning. I'd like to share some thoughts on this matter with you.

Rather than trying to "cover" curriculum, in our school we are helping children to "uncover" parts of the world that they would not otherwise know how to tackle. We do this by providing children with real and purposeful materials, experiences, and questions in ways that suggest many things to be done with them. By offering children these opportunities, we believe that they cannot help but be inventive. They cannot help but learn.

Our educational goals are to give children first-hand knowledge of the world; to develop an interest in further exploration of the world; to give them confidence in their ability to find out about the world on their own; to help them know how to make discriminating use of secondary sources -- books, experts, television, etc. -- to continually learn more.

We help children to learn by accepting their ideas; by providing a setting that suggests wonderful ideas to catch their interest; by letting them raise and answer their own questions; by letting them realize that their ideas are significant; by encouraging them to feel good about themselves for having wonderful ideas.

We try to stimulate kids to have excitement, puzzlement, surprise, anticipation, uncertainty. We are delighted to hear them say "Ooh, I got it!" or "Gee, how can I do it?" We value them noticing something new, wondering about something, framing a question for oneself to answer, sensing contradiction in one's own ideas. We try to accept and provide lots of occasions for honest attempts and for wrong outcomes.

> We view "wrong answers" as legitimate and important elements of learning. Wrong answers help children come honestly to terms with their own ideas. They are often very productive. Any wrong idea that is corrected through experience provides far more depth than if one never had a wrong idea to begin with. For example, you will have mastered an idea far more deeply if you have considered alternatives, tried to work them out where they didn't work, and figured out why it was that it didn't work. What you do about what you don't know is, in the final analysis, what determines what you will ultimately know.
>
> We trust that children (people) have a natural desire to learn. We believe that active learning will lead to independent learning. We believe that active learning will awaken your child's interest in the world and develop your child's confidence in his/her abilities. We believe that this is the best way to prepare your child for a life-time of exploration and growth.

Even the school's Parent/Teacher Association published a newsletter to give voice to parent comments and concerns. One feedback column, which had asked for comments about the schools' strengths and weaknesses, feelings about the upcoming progress reports, and homework, received the following kinds of comments:

> We think reading and math are (the school's) strong points. Various class projects based on themes like architecture or sea life have helped our son to think creatively and to explore other related topics like how pollution and net fishing have affected our ocean life. It has made him socially conscious, too. (He gave part of his Christmas money to Greenpeace.)
>
> The school gives validity to the children's thoughts, expressions, and creativity.
>
> (One strength is) the degree of communication with parents.
>
> I appreciate the basic attitude which underlies all -- that our children are valuable resources worthy of respect. It is my impression that they are treated kindly, which is not necessarily the case in other schools where I have worked. I'm glad that I am valued as a parent and seen as an ally, rather than "the enemy." In other schools, parents who want to take an active part in their child's education are often viewed with resentment and suspicion by teachers and other staff. I also appreciate the varied and stimulating activities (many books, recorder lessons, cooking, great trips). The parent meetings are an invaluable resource!

To ensure ongoing communication and accountability to parent concerns and student needs, the school developed a variety of formats for families to meet with teachers and each other to discuss the never-ending issues, questions, and concerns that arose in the course of

building a school. Class meetings were led by each classroom teacher twice a year to familiarize parents with the routines and expectations of each particular classroom group. All-school meetings took place monthly, serving as forums for discussion of the school's philosophy and values.

Just as the school's assessment strategies provided many ways to look at how students learn, all of these communication structures tried to provide the school community with multiple opportunities to learn about professional practice, to express concerns, to request explanations, to offer suggestions, or to share knowledge and information. In this way school community members participated in shaping the school's policies and practices.

Supports for Authentic Assessment

Structuring Time for Communication and Assessment

As a new school, BNS was able to invent new approaches to structuring school time and activities without having to undo as many attachments to a "master schedule" or traditional procedures as existing schools frequently feel bound by. Recognizing that planning, assessing, and reflecting on students' learning are crucial aspects of successful teaching, BNS looked for ways that teachers could have more time for the professional responsibilities involved in their assessment processes -- recording, organizing, reviewing, reflecting on, and summarizing their data -- as well as for the professional development needed to help them learn how to observe and to teach in new ways.

The staff reorganized the school's weekly schedule so that each Friday the director, along with other support personnel, supervised the children during an extra long lunch and recess period. This gave teachers almost a two hour period in which they could focus on assessment-related tasks. In addition, classes were occasionally combined for special projects so that teachers could be relieved for a day or half-day to work on records. Some district funds were also obtained to reimburse teachers for a portion of the time that they spent on assessment tasks.

The assessment processes themselves created "new" time in class, as they helped teachers shift to a "facilitator" role, replacing the role of "instructor" always at the center of the classroom. Because assessing students as they are actively engaged in different kinds of learning tasks creates a concomitant need to teach in ways that allow active engagement of students, a part of the traditional time problem is alleviated naturally as teachers create learning settings in which students are working rather than listening to the teacher. This frees teachers more to watch, record, and reflect on their students's work. As they look for direct evidence of many forms of student work, teachers provide more opportunities for students to engage in these many forms. This in turn requires them to structure their classrooms so they can provide a fuller range of independent activities. One Bronx New School teacher explains it this way:

> When a classroom is set up as a workshop in which children can work independently and in which the teacher assumes the role of facilitator rather than as the central figure around which all interaction occurs, the teacher is freed to engage in the essential task of observing and recording children's behavior and their work. While tremendous preparation, scheduling and thinking is required to get this process started, once it begins, it takes on a momentum of its own and results in changes in children's thinking, behavior, and dynamics. The children begin to function more autonomously. Subsequently, the teacher is freed up to move about the room, to jot down notes, and to conference with individuals or groups for purposes of assessment and instruction. In this conception of the classroom, assessment, in a sense, *is* the essence of teaching.

When Bronx New School teachers changed in this way, they indeed had more time for collecting assessment data. As they talked and learned about how to keep records and then experienced the effects of this on their teaching, they also came to feel that the time they devoted to this work was well spent. These notes, excerpted from a teacher's journal, discuss the benefits of their new approach to assessment:

> The day is so completely different! There's a calmness in the room. Everyone is busy. K. is calm. J. is happy, excited about working with bubbles. G. loves illustrating and drawing. S. is organizing a dummy for a magazine. N. is working on gliders. H. is working with balloons to figure out motion.

> The meeting today was the best so far. The technique of notetaking seems worth developing. I don't quite know how to do this well yet - but I feel its right because of the way things are at worktime. The work seems to generate itself. The children are beginning to emerge.

Teacher Dialogue and Professional Collaboration

Teachers had occasions to talk with each other about what they saw and what they thought at weekly after-school faculty meetings, at semi-annual all-school retreats, and at regular conferences with each other and the director. Here they questioned assumptions and asked questions of themselves and others in much the same way that they tried to encourage this in their students. Together they explored themes central to understanding their teaching, posed problems, discussed dilemmas which they were finding difficult to answer, questioned knowledge they found to be problematic, defined the kind of evidence they sought in order to document and explore issues, and suggested ways they could link up diverse experiences.

The following notes from a weekly staff meeting give an example of the kinds of conversations that promote and deepen educational understandings:

> Our discussion focused on the question: What are the values we hold dear and promote?

> Other questions emerged: How do we assess these values? What inadequacies/pitfalls do standardized tests have in regards to them? How can we best prepare our students for the tests since they are a city/state mandate? What are the implications of test results inside and outside this school?

Other meetings provided occasions to discuss still other issues which arose in the course of daily teaching practice: the practicalities of keeping records and storing information, the mysteries of a particular child and how to find his/her strengths, the difference between using observation for the purpose of facilitating a child's *own* learning agenda versus observing for the purpose of getting him/her to perform the *teacher's* predetermined agenda. Everyone's plate was always full of food for thought.

These conversations spilled over to teachers' interactions at lunch, in the hall, and after school. Staff were excited to be refining and deepening their practice, evolving the school's outlook and philosophy. Through shared understandings of the children they knew, they were coming to better know learning and curriculum. The teachers themselves speak about this process:

> The conversations and dialogue we had together were the most important thing for me. We grew because we shared. At the end of the day I would leave the children with only those crazy last ten minutes as a memory. But then, as I was cleaning my room, I'd talk to B. and she would ask me questions that would push me to look back and reflect on all the other things that happened. She would mirror them to me and I'd see all the positive things that happened too. These kinds of reflections helped me to see the children in a different light and gave me food for curriculum building/provisioning for the next period of time.

Another teacher had this to say:

> This is an inquiry-based school for adults as well as kids. We are constantly building a history of our school through documentation of children, families and teachers.

And still another explained:

> This is a place where teachers have the opportunity for the kind of support and reflection that they are trying to give to children. We are involved in an ongoing process of actively making knowledge about teaching and learning and about children's learning. What it takes to do this is to always be observing, always reflecting, always evolving. This underscores for me what it means to be a community of learners.

> The kind of professional development discussed here is different from the staff

"training" that takes place in many schools. It is not packaged or pre-conceived but rather is process oriented, evolving from teacher dialogue and reflection. It is based on the assumption that a teacher's learning, like that of a student's, is never finished but is always in the making.

Dealing with Standardized Testing

In spite of the nourishing professional environment that innovative teaching and assessment practices provided for teachers, children, and families at the Bronx New School, standardized testing still exerted a powerful impact on everyone's life. Children at the Bronx New School (and in other similar places) are still required to take city, state, and federally-mandated standardized tests.

Despite all that has been written about their damaging effects (Darling-Hammond, 1989, 1991; Neill, 1989; Oakes, 1985), the voice of these tests still rings loudest to the public with respect to assumptions about school accountability. As long as they continue to be the predominantly accepted form of assessment, a tension for teachers and schools will exist. Teachers will be torn between two responsibilities - enacting developmentally-appropriate, multi-faceted, learner-centered teaching and adequately preparing students for the often inappropriate, one-dimensional, decontextualized recall of facts and skills that the tests demand.

As Lauren Resnick, a nationally renowned expert on learning explains in her argument for the creation of more authentic forms of assessment:

> We've got a terrible model of what knowledge is, and what we care about, built into those tests: Collections of decontextualized and decomposed bits of knowledge that do not add up to competent thinking.... We have the assembly-line version of knowledge: Break it into little bits so any nincompoop can fill in the bubbles.... (T)he only way to get going on what we need to do (educationally) is to attack directly what is one of the most powerful dampers to the kind of change we need. Talk to teachers who have caught on to the idea that the kind of teaching required in a "thinking curriculum" is possible, and then ask them, "What is the biggest barrier to it?" Their answer eery time is, "Those standardized tests are coming, and I'm afraid my kids won't pass them."... The pressures to drill to the test are overwhelming, and they are overwhelming mainly in the schools that serve our poorest children (Education Week, 1992, p. S6).

The seemingly unresolvable tension between knowledge as it is used in real performance contexts and knowledge as it is asked for on standardized tests creates great anxiety for school people, even those most committed to innovative teaching and assessment

practices. Teacher after teacher spoke to this issue in an interview session with the school faculty. One teacher spoke of the tensions they created:

> The week of the tests was always very tense in our school. No matter how certain we felt that our way of teaching and keeping track of kids' growth was supportive of them and was helping them to learn and grow, the tests shook us to the core. It was here that we came smack up against the system and its values.

Another spoke of the limited information they provide:

> It was very painful to subject children to the tests. Some of my kids had grown tremendously through the course of the year. They made great progress in becoming independent readers but were still unable to read a passage out of context without picture clues. The records I kept of them could show this growth. But I knew it wouldn't show up on the tests.

Another teacher spoke of their demoralizing effect:

> The experience of taking the test was terribly demoralizing for many children. Sometimes I felt like all the growth in self-esteem and self-confidence that took place in the course of an entire year went down the drain in the two or three hours of taking the test.

Yet another addressed their developmental inappropriateness:

> The tests are so frustrating! They often ask children to do things that they are not ready to do, that developmentally they are not capable of doing. For example, there's research to document the fact that most second graders really don't comprehend and can't conceptualize place value. Yet second graders are expected to do place value problems on the math test. What do you do? You can't force children to learn something they aren't ready for. And if you teach them the tricks so that they can do the problems on the test, that gets in the way of their thinking and makes it more difficult for them to *really* understand when they would otherwise have been ready.

And another worried about the impact of test scores on future decisions affecting children's lives:

> Children's growth and development is uneven and takes place over long time spans. Sometimes there is a period when a person weaves in and out of understanding of a thing. The problem with the tests is that they can't really reflect that growth and development. At best they can only measure isolated, decontextualized skills or facts at one moment in time in a child's life. That could all change tomorrow or the next day. But decisions -- high stake ones

that may determine or significantly affect that child's future -- are made on the basis of that one or two hours on one day in the child's life.

Despite convictions about the inadequacies of the tests, Bronx New School teachers were painfully cognizant of the consequences the tests can have for their students. While test results would not significantly affect children's lives in this particular school, the scores still signified achievement to many families, to the school district, and to the world at large. So an effort was made to prepare students for them. All teachers agreed that the best preparation was to continue developing a learning environment that fostered skill acquisition in as meaningful and purposeful a context as possible. The tests were *never* to drive the curriculum.

A conscious differentiation was made between real learning -- for example, how to read or how to think mathematically -- and test preparation. Several weeks prior to the testing date, teachers exposed children to the format of the tests. They taught them how to fill in the bubbles on a separate answer sheet. They also taught strategies for answering multiple-choice questions. Children were constantly reassured that their test scores would not affect their life in the school and that what happened on the test would be viewed as merely a few hours of one day in the course of the year. They were continually reminded of the tests' limitations in demonstrating what students know and can do and that ongoing records of student work really provide this information.

Despite these anxieties and the pervasive belief that tests placed significant limitations on learning, students at the Bronx New School actually performed quite well on them. The areas in which they showed the greatest strength were the sections that allowed them to demonstrate their abilities to problem-solve in mathematics and to make sense of text in a holistic way. The older the children, the better the scores. It seemed that as the children progressed through the grades, the limiting format of the tests became less of a hindrance in allowing them to demonstrate what they knew and what they could do.

Authentic Assessment's Impact on Families

Many families were staunch advocates of the teaching and assessment practices being developed at the Bronx New School. As they witnessed their child's educational experience they appreciated the differences that life at the Bronx New School had made created. Many noted how happy their children were about attending school, how the school supported the diversity of children's backgrounds and talents, how the teaching approach encouraged curiosity and a love of learning, how segregation of children with special needs was replaced with special attention and special supports within the context of the mainstream community. They also understood how the school's assessment practices and reporting structures provided them with more information about their child than they had ever received from traditional test scores and report cards. Some of their views are expressed below in this excerpt from a parent letter to the local community newspaper:

As an active parent in our school, I have watched it turn into a true community of learners. I watched children take control of their own learning. I watched children learn to respect each other in a cooperative learning environment. I watched children with special needs being mainstreamed. I watched children learn to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner. I watched children, through the creative use of discarded materials, build bridges, skyscrapers and planets. I watched creativity flourish in so many different ways. I watched children from diverse racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds living, loving and learning together (Flynn, 1991, A15).

Despite widespread agreement with these sentiments, some families at the school remained uneasy about their individual children's progress in this nontraditional environment, different from what they had known before. Although elated by the growth and development they witnessed in their child, these parents needed to talk, share, compare, ask questions, express concerns, doubts, or anxieties with each other and school faculty. The school staff was aware of this tension. They soon realized that the best way to address it was to provide many forums for discussion, not only of authentic assessment but of the educational values, goals, and practices on which all of these practices are based. The various communication formats mentioned earlier -- Director's weekly *Notes*, teacher's curriculum letters, class meetings, all-school meetings, PTA News, progress reports, family conferences -- were created precisely for this reason. These helped families to learn about learning, encouraging and supporting them to recognize the strengths of their child, to share with the school their knowledge of their child, their culture and their community, to work together with the school to support children's growth and development. The homework assignment to a second/third grade class reproduced below was used by the teacher to explain aspects of her teaching philosophy and methodology:

January 10, 1991

Dear Families,

Tonight's H.W. involves reflecting back on our trip to see "Blue Planet" yesterday. For hesitant writers, drawing a picture first of something they were struck by and then writing about it (or simply describing the drawing) can help. Or ask your child to tell you about what they saw before writing. Verbalizing their ideas before writing them down helps the child realize he or she has something worth saying. Now the actual writing -- the hard part for many of us.

•If your child starts right in, not needing your assistance -- let them go. But when they are done, gently ask them to go back and check it over. Do all the sentences end with a period (or question mark)? Do they all begin with a capital letter? Questions about spelling?

•Help with spelling by:

-Encouraging them to listen for the first letter sound.

-Giving them words that rhyme with the one they're searching for. For example, they're trying to spell "stand." Run this list by them: land, band, hand, st___. You can also refer to them as "word families." This is the "and" family.

•If you write them down, your child will begin to see the pattern.
•Reversals are normal in beginning writers, e.g., "saw" for "was"; "fo" for "of"; "paly" for "play."
•Encourage them to write the words as they hear them when said slowly, e.g., Man-hat-tan for "Manhattan" (of course not all words are this cooperative).
•When your child is desperate for a word -- give it to them -- this should not be a battle.
•If none of the above seems to help your work with your child, let them write as they feel and please write a not on the back to let me know.
•Remember, writing will come just as learning to read did! Trust your child!

Thanks, Sue

The Director's weekly *Notes* also explained the purposes of some school practices. For example:

How do children learn writing in the whole language approach? In the whole language approach, children begin to write from the first day of school. Teachers allow, accept, and encourage them to write personal thoughts, notes, letters, cards, and stories. Children can do this because they are allowed to represent their compositions through pictures, marks, and scribble, because writing is viewed as the communication of messages.

Children can tell stories at any age but they have difficulty when they are young with conventional symbolic representation (conventional letters) and spelling. Sometimes the teacher is a scriber or recorder of children's stories, but often students are encouraged to use their own invented representations to "write" their own stories. This helps them to make phonetic sound-symbol connections that they can also use in their reading.

When children read back their pictures and scribbles, we are invited into <u>their</u> world of symbols. We learn what they understand about language, what they can do with it, and how we can help them to develop. Because they see conventional text everywhere -- on signs, labels, in their dictated stories, as well as in the literature stories we read to them several times a day -- they gradually integrate more conventional spelling and grammar forms into their writing. Older students also learn spelling, grammar, and usage during the process of writing. Spelling ability grows proportionately to the amount of writing and reading in which students engage. Spelling, grammar, and usage are further refined when students edit their own stories and those of their classmates. When needed, students receive individual and small-group lessons

on these conventions.

As conversation about teaching and learning spread throughout the school community, families increased their understandings and their commitment to learner-centered education. This conversation soon spread beyond the boundaries of the school to connect them with others involved in school reform initiatives. Families began to speak at conferences and forums and to write articles about their experiences. This excerpt from an article in one of the city's major newspapers, part of the parents' efforts to save the school when its was threatened with consolidation, gives a sense of the depth of their conviction and understanding:

> [Before my daughter came to the Bronx New School], when she entered first grade, her natural love of math and her pleasure in playing with numbers was squashed by a well-intentioned teacher who was ignorant of the way children really learn. You see, my daughter knew without thinking that 3+3=6. But she wrote the 6 backward, and the answer was marked wrong. So she thought that 3+3 equaled something other than 6. In fact, she wrote all her numbers backwards and so all her answers were marked wrong. Her ease with computation was destroyed. For children at that stage of development, backwards or forwards is all the same thing. That confusion sorts itself out in its own time. But children in our school system are not trusted to learn in their own time. They must learn according to the timetable of "experts" who measure and quantify these things. At the Bronx New School, children learned how to learn rather than how to endure one more tedious day. [When my daughter came there she] slowly began to regain her self-confidence and curiosity. I felt such relief knowing that she was valued for her uniqueness and was being encouraged to take control of her learning -- to trust herself as she was trusted by her teacher (Danzig, 1991, p. 48, 90).

A Community of Learners

This story of assessment at the Bronx New School gives rise to some thoughts about teaching, learning, and the development of community. It illustrates how observation and documentation of student work can be used for assessment purposes. In contrast to traditional standardized assessments, which consider but a single dimension of what a student can do at an end point of learning, this kind of assessment is longitudinal, multi-dimensional, and richly textured. It allows for many forms of expression of many kinds of knowledge. Rather than comparing students against one another, it is both self-referenced and theory-referenced (Johnston and Harmon, 1992). It compares students to their past work, developing a portrait of individual growth over time, grounded in a developmental continuum.

This account of the Bronx New School illustrates the ability of authentic assessments

to inform and support the teaching and learning process. In contrast to norm-referenced, standardized tests, which rarely yield information useful to teaching, authentic assessments provide understandings that help students from diverse backgrounds and experiences identify and meet their own standards as well as achieve the goals defined by their community.

The accounts of teaching and learning presented here strengthen the view that no two people have the same background, learn in a like manner, or take away the same knowledge from the same experience. Standardized teaching and assessment *don't* address this fact, while learner-centered curricula -- grounded in the learner's own interests, purposes, and prior experiences and understandings -- *do*. Curriculum that does this is, by nature, intricately connected to assessment and can be defined as "opportunities for inquiry," in which the learner is the primary constructor and integrator of knowledge who can be guided best by the in-depth knowledge teachers gain through their observations of students and their work. Such a curriculum focuses on the attainment of a common set of broad and comprehensive goals for all students, while allowing for each individual's different approaches to learning.

This study also points to the importance for authentic teaching, learning, and assessment of a learning environment designed to provide multiple kinds of learning experiences and multiple forms of expression of that learning. Such an environment is richly provisioned with many different kinds of materials, is activity-based and inquiry-oriented. It accommodates students of different ages who possess varying strengths and abilities. It encourages continuous dialogue among peers, and it places both teacher and students in the role of learner.

Many different forms of assessment can be used to examine and learn from student work. Akeem's story, for example, illustrates how multiple indicators of growth and development can reveal student strengths which are a central resource for supporting learning. Building on strengths ensures that students' diverse abilities get recognized and used.

The tension between standards and standardization is another issue raised by this case study. Standards provide common ground and common goals, while standardization requires uniform formats and outcomes that deny the uniqueness of each learner. In the course of doing their work, Bronx New School teachers resolved this tension by developing standards of practice -- shared outlooks that allow for a variety of learning formats and a range of student outcomes. As teachers developed similar ways of looking at children and the learning process, they came to agreement about broad, common goals for student achievement. Within this context, personalized teaching methods and assessment instruments, as well as diverse demonstrations of learning outcomes, can be encouraged and can flourish. A common language and culture emerges and learning standards are defined.

This struggle cannot take place without collaboration and conversation amongst teachers and the school community. Assessment-related discussions, as well as experience with the assessments themselves, helps teachers to refine their perceptions of students' skills and abilities. Ongoing dialogue leads to a continuous examination of teaching strategies, of

classroom activities, and of goals and standards for learning. This enhances teaching effectiveness and professional growth, contributes to a sense of professional renewal and empowerment, and serves as a catalyst for the development of a shared vision.

Including the families of the school community in these discussions and experiences, provides a meaningful way for families to be involved in the life of any school. Bronx New School families were valued as partners in the educational process. Their knowledge of their children was used by teachers to inform and enhance the learning that took place in school . In return, teachers continually presented information about child development, about learning, and about teaching methodology which further enhanced families' understandings of how best to support their children's growth. The result of this partnership was an informed community better equipped -- both individually and publicly -- to advocate for quality education.

These stories of families, teachers, and children at the Bronx New School bring to life John Dewey's (1938) conception of a "community of learners." In this vision, all members of the learning community are valued and respected for their knowledge, their contribution, and their needs. Each voice is listened to and each voice is honored. Authentic assessment practices and learner-centered teaching, woven together into the fabric of a school, are central to the realization of this vision.

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